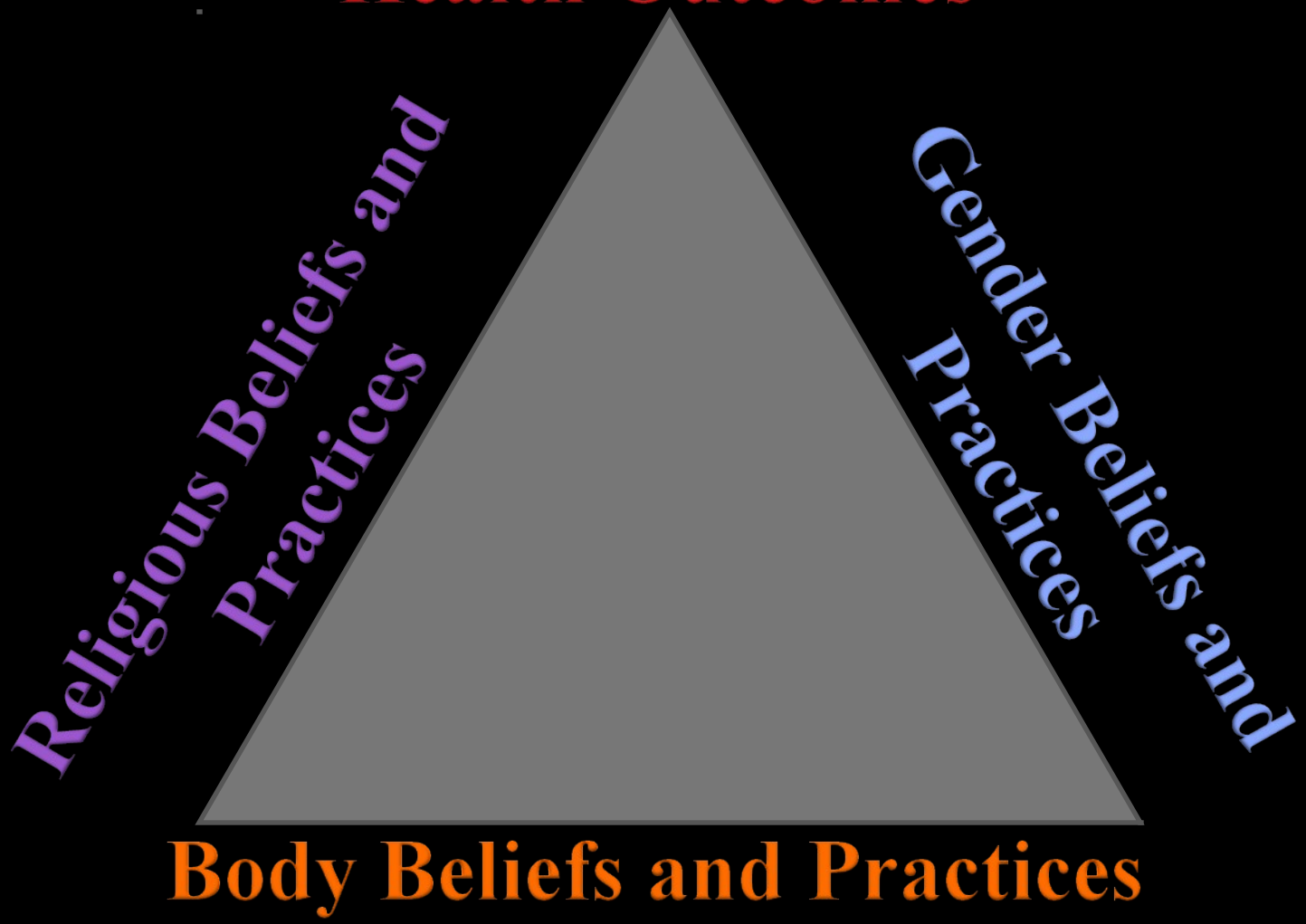
Religion, Relationships and Health: Jewish and Gender Perspectives


Health Outcomes
Religious Beliefs and Practices
Gender Beliefs and Practices
Body Beliefs and Practices

Two Healing Models

- Biomedical model
  - What?
  - How?
  - Individual
- Religious model
  - Why?
  - Who?
  - And who else?
  - Community

Role of the community in the healing process

- Minimal – illness and healing are individual matters
- Accusative
- Supportive (spiritual support, pragmatic support)
- Maximal (illness in the individual is conceptualized as a reflection of illness in the social body thus healing must occur at the communal level)

Midrash

- Traditional Jewish literary technique of expanding upon Biblical stories in order to learn wider truths

Moshe because of the Kushite woman he had taken … And they said, Has the Lord indeed spoken only with Moshe? Has he not spoken also with us? And the Lord heard it….. And the anger of the Lord was inflamed against them, and he departed…, and behold, Miriam was snow white, stricken with tsara'at (leprosy); and Aharon looked upon Miriam, and behold, she was diseased. And Aharon spoke to Moshe, Alas my lord, I pray thee, lay no sin upon us, for we have done foolishly, and we have sinned. Let her not be as one dead, of whom the flesh is half consumed when he comes out of his mother's womb. And Moshe cried to the Lord, saying, Heal her now, O God, I pray thee. And the Lord said to Moshe: … Let her be shut out from the camp seven days, and after that let her be received in again. And Miriam was shut out from the camp seven days, and the people did not journey until Miriam was brought in

Theme: Illness Breaks the Social Fabric

- Illness both reflects and causes disharmony in the cosmos
- A society can’t be healthy unless all members are healthy

Theme: Social Upheavals Inscribe on Women's Bodies

- Closing ranks / controlling women in response to feelings that "our ways" are under attack
- "On average, women suffer more than men from international and civil wars, as measured by the effect of conflict on the ratio of female to male life expectancy." (Plumper and Neumayer, 2006)
- Violence and the threat of violence against women during war, especially ethnic / civil wars

Theme: Woman as the "Designated Patient"

- Women are sicker, though men die quicker
- Cultural representations: machismo and the *sabra*
- Israeli example: Discrepancies between the comparatively good health of Israeli men and the comparatively bad health of Israeli women suggest that whatever is making women sick transcends the health care delivery system.

Theme: Inequality is sickening

- Unequal access to resources
- Stress and the somatization of stress
- The paradox of high responsibility and low authority

Summary: Religion can Make Women Sick

- Sacralizing, legitimizing and ritualizing gender inequality as an inherent aspect of the cosmos
- Inscription of religious laws and beliefs on women's bodies (literally!)
- "Woman" as symbols of the collective – the need to control women's bodies for the future of the collective (hyper-scrutiny / Foucault)
- Ideologies of female impurity/ uncontrolled sexuality
- Blaming women for sin
- Laws and customs limiting women's access to important resources

Religion can Heal

- Research shows better health outcomes for people who attend church, pray, etc.
  - Community
  - Healthier life style
  - Sense of purpose
  - Stress reduction (meditation, prayer, faith – lower allostatic load)
  - Religion can mandate appropriate social behavior and limit some forms of gender violence
- Religion can provide women with culturally esteemed and spiritually potent roles
- “Charity saves from death”

Implications for public health, 1

- Understanding how religious beliefs, practices and structures enhance or detract from the health status of variously situated members of the community
- Avoidance of simplistic models of religion as an unmitigated good or an unmitigated bad (“religion is inherently health enhancing” OR “superstitions prevent people from acting rationally in terms of health behaviors”)

Implications for public health, 2

- Understanding that illness and health care are never culturally neutral.
- Understanding the social and political power of healers and health care providers.
- Understanding that success and failure of religious and folk healing / medical interventions constitute “proof” of ideological stances

Implications for public health, 3

- Recognition of (and respect for) diverse notions of “health”
- Knowledge of the range of healing practices utilized within a community
- Identification of potential partners (and potential enemies!) within religious communities and health care communities